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# Durkheim's Conception of the Religious Life: a Critique

*Pour une critique de la conception durkheimienne de la vie religieuse*

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## DURKHEIM'S CONCEPTION OF THE RELIGIOUS LIFE : A CRITIQUE

*L'article se propose de mettre à jour divers points faibles de la théorie durkheimienne de la vie religieuse, les uns provenant d'incohérences par rapport aux règles méthodologiques que Durkheim avait lui-même posées antérieurement, les autres étant dues à sa conception rationaliste des sentiments et des croyances sociaux. Par exemple, si l'on s'en tient au canon méthodologique des Règles, les conclusions des Formes élémentaires ne peuvent en aucun cas être généralisées à tous les systèmes religieux. Par ailleurs, sa critique du naturisme est plus que faible : elle est menée à partir d'arguments utilitaristes. Sa propre théorie finit par n'être elle-même qu'une version sociologique du naturisme. Son refus rationaliste de distinguer entre d'un côté les croyances et les valeurs et de l'autre la connaissance l'a contraint à chercher la représentation objective des sentiments religieux dans la société elle-même. De plus, la théorie de Durkheim ne s'intéresse pas vraiment à l'origine du sacré mais, tout au plus, à la manière dont le sacré s'impose à la société. Enfin, sa théorie aboutit à une impasse : la société en laquelle s'incarne le sacré ne peut être ni la société dans son ensemble ni aucun des groupes qui la constituent.*

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*El artículo se propone evidenciar diversos puntos conflictivos de la teoría de Durkheim sobre la vida religiosa. Esta conflictividad emana, en ciertos casos, de la incoherencia en relación con las reglas metodológicas que Durkheim había enunciado anteriormente y, en otros, debido a su concepción racionalista de los sentimientos y de las creencias sociales. Por ejemplo, si nos circunscribimos a los cánones metodológicos de las Reglas, las conclusiones de las Formas Elementales no pueden ser generalizadas a todos los sistemas religiosos. Por otra parte, su crítica al naturismo es excesivamente simple.: es elaborada a partir de argumentos utilitarios. Su propia teoría acaba no siendo otra cosa que una versión sociológica del naturismo. Su oposición racionalista a distinguir entre, por un lado, las creencias y los valores y por otro el conocimiento, la búsqueda de representaciones objetivas de sentimientos religiosos en la sociedad. Por otra parte, la teoría de Durkheim no se interesa realmente en el origen de la teoría de lo sagrado sino, en el mejor de los casos, en la*

*manera como lo sagrado se impone a la sociedad. En fin, su teoría lleva a un impase : la sociedad en la que se encarna lo sagrado no puede ser ni la sociedad en su conjunto ni los grupos que la constituyen.*

“ ... un Ordre à la fois idéal et agissant.”  
Marcel Granet, *La pensée chinoise*.

## 1. Introduction

Of all sociologists who have dealt with the religious life, few have approached it with a more religious mood than Emile Durkheim himself. In effect, he discusses religion with the same feeling of reverence as the one with which the religious man is assumed to approach it. Moreover, insofar as Durkheim succeeds in conveying the sentiment of sublimity that the sacred elicits in us and in simultaneously submitting the sacred to a rational and scientific discussion, he places himself in the Kantian perspective as defined in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (Kant : 1956). This sensitivity to be exposed to – and the ability to transmit – the sublimity of the religious without disregarding the need for its scientific understanding gives singular value to Durkheim's reflexions.

The object of this paper is to critically examine Durkheim's central ideas concerning the sociology of the religious life as exposed in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (Durkheim : 1915). Nevertheless, for the reason mentioned above, it is important to draw attention to the intrinsically limited character of any *sociological* critique of that work. As Durkheim's conception of social and religious life is profoundly wrought with a moral dimension which pervades his entire outlook, a sociological critique is, in itself, of limited value and may appear as excessive. An adequate understanding and a fair assessment of his thought would have to bring into focus his social philosophy and his authentic moral concern.

On the other hand, the theoretical significance and import of *The Elementary Forms* transcends the formal limits of the theory of the religious life. Indeed, its relevance not only has to do with his representation of the religious as an eminently social fact but also with his conception of man's mind, man's cognitive structure as fundamentally of religious origin. *The Elementary Forms* should, therefore, be viewed as containing both a sociological theory of religion and the rudiments for a social epistemology. For these reasons, the sociological critique advanced here is just one analytical moment of a task which is inevitably much more vast than we could possibly perform now.

Durkheim is at one with Marx and Weber in his rational attempt at “ desacralizing ” the religious world. Religious beliefs and practices, he will argue, are possible by virtue of our experience in and of society. Society is ultimately

accountable for the existence of religion. The profane, rational and positive character of his theory is to be understood in this sense.

And yet – contrary to Marx and Weber – if there is an apparent secularization of religion, there is, simultaneously, a “sacralization” of society by virtue of its religious character. How could Durkheim, the author of *The Rules* (Durkheim : 1964) arrive to this vision of society ?

Two trends, at least, concurred to lead him in that direction. One of them was his sociological reductionism – which denied the possibility of conceiving the emergence of religious beliefs and sentiments from our experience without the collective, i.e. social, experience :

Thus one positive conclusion is arrived at as the result of this critical examination. Since neither man nor nature have of themselves a sacred character, they must get it from another source. Aside from the human individual and the physical world, *there should be some other reality*, in relation to which this variety of delirium which all religion is in a sense, has a significance and an *objective value*. ” (Durkheim : 1915, 87-88, my emphases).

The other trend was his positivist epistemology – which encouraged him to define man’s cognitive orientation toward external reality exclusively in terms of empirical, observable data. The source of all experience is always immediate :

“ Our entire study rests upon this postulate that the unanimous sentiment of the believers of all times cannot be purely illusory. ” (Durkheim : 1915, 417 and Book I, *passim*).

Still, *The Elementary Forms* may as well be considered as his less positivist work. This partly reflects the evolution and transformation which his thought underwent throughout the years but partly, too, the nature of the phenomenon under study : unlike the other indices he employed – law in *The Division of Labor in Society* (Durkheim : 1964a), suicide rates in *Suicide* (Durkheim : 1951) – religious *rituals* could not be properly understood without substantial consideration of their *symbolic* functions, simply because their *meaning* is not immediately apparent.

## 2. Primitive religion, origin, and change

Durkheim devotes the *Introduction* of *The Elementary Forms* chiefly to the discussion of two important issues : one is the defense of the study of primitive religion as a theoretically seminal endeavor ; the other is an analysis of the role played by religion in the constitution of our logical categories.

The first issue is the justification of the study of primitive religion as representative of any religious system regardless of its degree of complexity. This thesis is couched in methodological terms. The elaborate complexity and differentiation of complex religions, Durkheim argues, makes “ very difficult to distinguish what is secondary from what is principal, the essential from the accessory. ” (p. 5)

By contrast, these differences and variations are kept to a minimum in the religious systems of lower societies by virtue of the slack development of individuality, the small scale of the groups and the homogeneity of the environment. It is, therefore, easier, he concludes, to study primitive religions

because their essential elements stand out conspicuously and so do the relationships among these elements.

Now in so far as all religions "are species of the same class" (p. 4), all of them "have the same objective significance and fulfil the same functions everywhere" whatever the number of outward forms they might eventually take. (p. 5) It is therefore legitimate to study a primitive religious system as it serves "to show the nature of the religious life" just as well as any other. (p. 3)

Why are all religious systems species of the same class is something which is not justified. Supposedly "[t]hey respond to the same needs, they play the same role, they depend upon the same causes". (p. 3) But even accepting this statement in this dogmatic form – after all, that proposition should be a matter of empirical investigation, not an aprioristic postulate – the methodological procedure of this work consisting in exclusively studying one single case exhaustively to generalize for other cases cannot be accepted on account of Durkheim's own principles of methodology as previously established in the *Rules* :

"Consequently, to explain a social institution belonging to a given species, one will compare its different forms, not only among peoples of that species but in all preceding species as well... This method, which may be called genetic, would give at once the analysis and the synthesis of the phenomenon. For, on the one hand, it would show us the separate elements composing it, by the very fact that it would allow us to see the process of accretion or action. At the same time, thanks to this wide field of comparison, we should be in a much better position to determine the conditions on which depend their formation. *Consequently, one cannot explain a social fact of any complexity except by following its complete development through all social species.*" – (Durkheim : 1964, 138-9, his emphasis).

According to the canon just quoted from the *Rules*, the conclusions of *The Elementary Forms* are, alas, valid *just* for Australian systems of religion : they cannot be, therefore, generalized to other systems than the primitive Australian ones.

On the other hand, the study of primitive religion is also defended on account of Durkheim's "historical" method. The nature of religion is revealed when we get at its roots, and this calls for the analysis of its causes, the analysis of its origin. Treading on the hills of a theoretical tradition inaugurated by Descartes and followed by Comte, Durkheim, nevertheless, dismisses any historical conception of origin in terms of events, occurrences, accidents : origin, he points out, is rather to be understood as "the ever-present causes upon which the most essential forms of religious thought and practice depend." (p. 8) If he chose to study Australian religion it is not because it is more "original" in historical terms – which, incidentally, we might add, is also correct in the light of its totemic structure – but mainly because it is *structurally, morphologically* more "original".

This method could not be employed without affecting theoretical concepts related to the idea of history, like the notion of change. Evolutionism had been able to somehow rescue the idea of change despite the de-historicization of it thanks to the idea of progress. In effect, change may not, according to that view, fundamentally alter the essence of institutions *but* it is anyway

relevant to understand the increasing adaptative capacity that the notion of progress conveyed. Progress is an enhanced ability to adapt.

Emile Durkheim, by contrast, refused to accept the idea of progress. Under those circumstances, he removed all relevance from the notion of change. If the elements essentially constitutive of an institution are already present in its most simple social stage, the changes to which this institution is subsequently exposed do not add any thing essentially new to it. Change is, therefore, essentially insignificant...

The second issue which is addressed in the *Introduction* concerns the role played by religion, in particular, and by the social organization, in general, in the formation of logical categories. It is not necessary to get into that discussion. All I would like to say is that Durkheim puts empiricism to task with Kantian arguments whereas Kantian rationalism is criticized with sociological postulates. Strictly speaking, that discussion does not add much to the theory to be discussed below.

Once he made clear his rationale for his selection of Australian religion, Durkheim sets about to elaborate his general theory.

### 3. Religion, the religious, and the sacred

“ Il n’y a qu’un Espace vide là  
où l’étendue n’est pas socialisée... ”  
Marcel Granet, *La pensée chinoise*

As usual, he characteristically begins his book in proposing a definition of the phenomenon under scrutiny and making a very thorough criticism of current theories associated with the phenomenon. This time he enlarges his scope as he deals separately with the idea of the *religious* and with the concept of *religion*.

With regard to the former, he examines those conceptions which associate religious phenomena either with the *supernatural* or with the *divinity*. These are easy prey. He has no difficulty in showing the inadequacy of the idea of divinity as the constitutive characteristic by showing, among other things, the existence of atheist religions.

His attempt to dissociate religious phenomena from the supernatural, however, raises some doubts. It is possible to identify behind that attempt his positivist orientation. His point is as follows : the idea of the supernatural is not primitive. Why ? Because :

“ to say that certain things are supernatural, it is necessary to have the sentiment that a *natural order of things* exists, that is to say, that the phenomena of the universe are bound together by necessary relations, called laws. ” (p. 26)

This intuition or, as he calls it, sentiment emerged only with the rise of positive science in later stages of civilization. (p. 28) Therefore, he concludes, the idea of the supernatural is not essential to religion.

That is a striking argument, to put it mildly. The idea that the conception of a natural order of things is alone the gradual construction of positive science could not be more inaccurate. As a matter of fact, the idea of nature sprang

not with positive science but with philosophy. To “delay” the emergence of the notion of necessity to the development of scientific knowledge is, to say the least, excessive. Long before the birth of positive science, ancient cosmogonies revealed the idea of a universe subject to necessary laws. It is, moreover, quite probable that the opposite was, in fact, truer, namely, that the conception of a natural order was of religious (and magical) origin. This seems to square better with the mythical idea of divine entities as agencies in the creation of a cosmos. It is religion that first transformed *chaos into cosmos*. Teleology was, first, traceable to theology, as it were.

Having rejected those two conceptions, Durkheim then proposes his own. To him the regulative attribute of the religious is the distinction between the *sacred* and the *profane*. He also identifies *interdictions* as the indices expressing sacredness. “Sacred things,” he will say, “are those which the interdictions protect and isolate”. (pp. 40-41) Interdiction is not, however, merely an *appearance* of the sacred; interdiction *bestows* the sacred element to the definition. The social character of the sacred is, then, quite evident. The religious character of an object is not something inherent in it but, instead, superimposed on it.

This idea is, nonetheless, at odds with the other idea that “sacred things differ in nature from profane things..., they have a wholly different essence.” (p. 42) We are first told that the sacred does not inhere in the object and later told that sacred objects have a different nature. Once more it is possible to observe Durkheim’s unresolved compromise with positivist and rationalist orientations. Following the empirical procedures of enquiry he first applied in *The Division of Labor* he searches for the indexical, observable manifestation of the sacred in the existence of interdictions being, at the same time, led to conceive sacred things as objects essentially different from the profane.

Durkheim does not rest satisfied with the definition of religion simply in terms of a determinate set of religious beliefs and practices. Otherwise, magic would have to be accepted as a religion. Characteristically enough, he then proceeds to look again for a distinctively observable attribute expressive of the religious. He finds it in the church, the community which embodies the religious set of beliefs and practices.

The construction is elegant and architectonic. Actually, the same role interdiction plays with regard to the sacred, is played by the church with respect to the religious system. A set of interdictions and a church can therefore be visualized as the theoretical and institutional pillars of the religious life.

#### 4. *The criticism of animism and naturism*

“ Dans un monde bien aménagé,  
seuls les coins perdus que le  
dais du Ciel ne recouvre pas sont  
les endroits où on laisse subsister  
vaguement les êtres qui ont  
une nature monstrueuse ou divine ”.  
Marcel Granet, *La pensée chinoise*.

Once clarified the issues relative to the idea of the *religious*, his next task is to submit to criticism the current conceptions of elementary religion :



*animism* and *naturism*. Typically, he tries to carry his attack in two different ways : in the first place by showing the *logical* inconsistencies and weaknesses of those interpretations, and in the second place, by bringing an *empirical* evidence that contradicts either propositions or consequences logically derived from theory.

He first puts animist theory to task for its conception of religious phenomena as merely hallucinatory representations with no objective foundation. For Durkheim, of course, religious phenomena express an objective reality. Otherwise, he remarks, it would be inconceivable to explain "how has this extraordinary dupery been able to perpetuate itself all through the course of history." (p. 70) Then he brings in some nice pieces of empirical evidence that refute animist theory.

But if Durkheim had no pain in shattering to pieces animism, his criticism of naturism is, by contrast, weak. It is interesting that he is at a loss to find empirical evidence to refute the theory. The *only* piece looking like an empirical attack on naturism is timidly presented in the concluding paragraph of the chapter devoted to that critique. It reads :

"Finally, if the objects of nature really became sacred because of their imposing forms or the forces which they manifest, then the sun, the moon, the sky, the mountains, the sea, the winds, in a word, the great cosmic powers, should have been the first to be raised to this dignity ; for there are no others more fitted to appeal to the senses and the imagination. But as a matter of fact, they were divinized but slowly. The first beings to which the cult is addressed... are humble vegetables and animals, in relation to which men could at least claim an equality : they are ducks, rabbits, kangaroos, lizards, worms, frogs, etc. Their objective qualities surely were not the origin of the religious sentiments which they inspired." (p. 86).

It should be born in mind that the objects of worship that *should* first call our attention are those arbitrarily chosen by Durkheim himself. Neither these objects nor the "hierarchy of dignity" (the sun, the moon, etc.) which he constructs derive necessarily from the propositions of naturism. I cannot see just why frogs, for instance, are less "fitted to appeal to the senses and the imagination" of the primitive man. That is sheer ethnocentrism.

How does Durkheim go about to criticize naturism in logical, theoretical terms ? He starts by acknowledging that naturism is in principle founded on our sensory experience, on our perception of nature. However, language plays a trick with these perceptions and transforms them into an illusory system of hallucinations that strips naturism of its originally sound basis. Language alone gives life to those creations of our mind. The objection is adequate.

But naturism also claims, he adds, that religion springs from our need to know the world in which we live. "If we have need of knowing the nature of things [as that theory holds], it is *in order to act upon them* in an appropriate manner." (p. 79, my emphasis). Now the conceptions of things, he continues, given us by religion, and particularly its elementary types, are utterly impractical for this purpose. We must therefore, he adds, conclude that the reason for the existence of religion has nothing to do with the above mentioned need. The constant failures of religion with regard to the satisfaction of such a need would quickly show, indeed, the practical inadequacy of religion.

It is perplexing and ironical that Durkheim, the staunch enemy of utilitarianism, would attack naturism with such an utilitarian argument. When Durkheim looks at religious *experience* and religious *beliefs* from an instrumental point of view and when he likewise looks for the source of religious values in our desire to have a *rational control* of the external world, he can be put to task for the same reason as the one that led him in *The Division of Labor in Society* to consider interest, and by extension utility, a poor explanatory category :

“ There is nothing less constant than interest. Today, it unites me to you ; tomorrow, it will make me your enemy. Such a cause can only give rise to transient relations and passing associations.” (1964a, 204).

Still, the weakness of the above argument does not only rest upon its lack of sociological sophistication but also upon the premise which supports it. That premise is, in fact, questionable to the extent that not all types of knowledge aim at getting at the nature of things in order to act upon them. The idea of control through knowledge (i.e. : the Greek *episteme*) has an eminently scientific – and originally magic – origin but is by no means shared by all types of knowledge. Religious and philosophical varieties of knowledge are not primarily concerned with the goal of control as the ultimate justification of knowledge. Those varieties are of a, so to speak, disinterested kind and are better grasped by means of the classical notion of *gnosis*. Religious knowledge and, by extension, religions cannot be judged on the basis of their efficacy for control as the criterium of their survival.

Durkheim's pragmatic insistence on the efficacy of knowledge is accountable in terms of his naturalistic epistemology which is incapable of making the phenomenologically crucial distinction between *perception of things* and *perception of expressions*. This distinction is crucial if one wishes to grasp the uniqueness of *cultural* concepts as opposed to naturalistic concepts. Phenomenological analysis as well as child psychology have shown, moreover, the genetical primacy of the perception of expressions – rooted in myth, affection and the ego – vis à vis the perception of things – rooted in science, measurement and the object – both for society and the child. (Cassirer, 1957, Part I, chap. 2, *passim*, and Cassirer, 1960, chap. 2, *passim*). “ In any event ”, Cassirer remarks, “ immersion in the phenomenon of perception shows us one thing – that the perception of life is not exhausted by the mere perception of things, that the experience of the ‘thou’ can never be dissolved into an experience of the mere ‘it’, or reduced to it even by the most complex conceptual mediations. Even from a purely genetic standpoint there seems to be no doubt to which of the two forms of perception we should accord priority. The farther back we trace perception, the greater becomes the preeminence of the ‘thou’ form over the ‘it’ form, and the more plainly the purely expressive character takes precedence over the matter or thing-character. The understanding of expression is essentially earlier than the knowledge of things.” (Cassirer, 1957, 62-63).

##### 5. Durkheim's equation of knowledge, beliefs and values

It follows that Durkheim's inability to draw a clear distinction between knowledge on the one hand and beliefs and values on the other, account for

his mistaken interpretation of the religious experience. But why, after all, is it so fatal to assimilate beliefs and values to knowledge ? For several reasons.

From a sociological standpoint, to identify beliefs and values with knowledge means that our system of action and orientation toward the world takes on a distinctively *cognitive, rational* character. There is no one single social theory which would sensibly accept this ideal and extreme position. We already saw its inappropriateness to attack naturism.

Another consequence of great importance for the construction of his theory of religion was that in identifying knowledge – i.e. : *positive* knowledge, as here understood – with evaluative and normative ideas and beliefs he was forced to demand from these ideas and beliefs an empirical basis. (“ Our entire study rests upon this postulate that the unanimous sentiment of the believers of all times cannot be purely illusory. ” p. 417) This demand for “ equivalence ” of ideas to *observable* reality illustrates quite well his position. Hence he applies to beliefs and ideas the criterium of validity characteristic of scientific knowledge : the “ correspondence ” between the mental representation and the objective, external thing represented.

Inescapably, then, all representations should have, for Durkheim, an empirical, observable reference. No wonder, then, that he was compelled to transform society into the object of religious representations. (See above). It is clear then how his sociological reductionism together with his epistemology led him to consider society as the ground and principle of our religious experience. (Cf. p. 418 and *passim*.)

But the “ correspondence ” between the object and its representation may be necessary in the field of empirical knowledge alone. It is by no means necessarily so in other provinces, like, in our case, the religious. In effect, the problem of the validity of our knowledge, the question of the relationship between our ideas and the objective world, is central for scientific knowledge for obvious reasons. Phenomenological and religious knowledge tolerate and admit the coexistence of several representations of the same object. Again, and by contrast, the role of tradition, authority, revelation and faith as sources of evidence are central for religious thought ; yet they are logically irrelevant for scientific ideas. Durkheim failed to realize that the nature and the functions of these different types of cognition are not uniform. They are not, that is, “ species of the same class ”...

However paradoxical it may seem, Durkheim’s theory of religion is basically a sociological version of naturism. He commits the same mistake as the one he attributed to that school with respect to the origin of the idea of the sacred. In fact, according to naturism, objects become sacred “ because of their imposing forms or the forces which they manifest ”. (p. 86) And what is so “ sacred ” or “ religious ” about society ? How is it transformed into a sacred object anyway ? The answer echoes from his early writings : because of its binding, imperative moral force : “ Religious forces are therefore human forces, moral forces. ” (p. 49) (1) Or even better :

“ Since it is in spiritual ways that social pressure exercises itself, it could not fail to give men the idea that outside themselves there exist one or several powers, both moral and, at the same time, efficacious, upon which they depend. [...] As long as scientific analysis does not come to teach it to them, men know well that they are acted upon, but they do not know by whom. So they must invent by

themselves the idea of these powers with which they feel themselves in connection, and from that, we are able to catch a glimpse of the way by which they were led to represent them under forms that are really foreign to their nature and to transfigure them by thought. " (p. 209)

Thus, society, too, becomes a sacred object by manifesting its (moral) force, by the constraint it imposes upon us. The difference between the naturalist interpretation and his own is *a matter of object, not of mechanism*. Substitute society for natural powers and we arrive, likewise, at the origin of religious sentiments. In both cases the origin is an external force which arouses these sentiments.

## 6. The emergence of the sacred

" ... on ne conçoit pas de dieux  
qui soient étrangers aux hommes,  
qui aient une *autre essence* que la leur.  
L'Univers est un."  
Marcel Granet, *La pensée chinoise*.

But just why society awakes in us this sentiment ? Why should this force become a source of religious awe whereas physical forces do not ? Because we entertain for them a feeling of *respect* which physical forces do not inspire. (p. 212 and *passim*) That is all right. The moral forces of society have an unquestionable ascendancy which elicit our respect in a sense that frogs and stars do not.

*Still, how does it come that this respect is transformed into worship ?* How does, in other words, the sentiment of the *sacred* appear ? Because it is quite admissible to agree with Durkheim in all the steps traced thus far in according a moral force to society without ending up worshipping it. Whence comes the *sacred* ? Durkheim's answer is found in page 206 :

" Thus the totem is before all a symbol, a material expression of something else. But of what ?

" [...] In the first place, it is the outward and visible form of what we have called the totemic principle or god. But it is also the symbol of the determined society called the clan [...] *So if it is at once the symbol of the god and of the society, is that not because the god and the society are only one ?* How could the emblem of the group have been able to become the figure of this quasi-divinity, if the group and the divinity were two distinct realities ? The god of the clan, the totemic principle, *can therefore be nothing else than* the clan itself, personified and represented to the imagination under the visible form of the animal or vegetable which serves as totem.

" But how has this apotheosis been possible, and how did it happen to take place in this fashion ?

" In a general way, it is unquestionable that a society has all that is necessary to arouse the sensation of the divine in minds, merely by the power that it has over them ; *for to its members it is what a god is to his worshippers*. In fact, a god is, first of all, a being whom men think of as superior to themselves, and upon whom they feel that they depend. [...] Now society also gives us the sensation of a perpetual dependence. " (My emphases).

Durkheim's answer is as ingenious as it is fallacious : if a symbol stands for two objects, "then" the two objects are the same... Moreover, he also attributes this sacred character to society *on account of the analogy* he finds between our attitudes towards it and the believer's attitude towards his god : as the religious attitude of the believer towards his god is analogous to our attitude towards society, we must then conclude that society arouses in us a sacred sentiment. In both cases, furthermore, we experience a sensation of dependence and in both cases we submit ourselves to privation and sacrifice (p. 207).

But just because there is such an *analogy* it does not follow that society is transformed into a sacred object or, likewise, that in *both* cases the object is the same. An analogy does not have the force of a necessary inference or the force of a fact.

All the same, the weakest point of the analogy of Durkheim is the circularity of his reasoning. In effect, in order to account for the *explicandum* he has *previously* taken for granted the existence of the *sacred*. Therefore, his theory could at best be defined as an interpretation of *how* the idea of the sacred is superimposed upon society, and not as an interpretation about the *genesis* or the *source* of that idea. At bottom, the, he begs the question of the origin of the *sacred* insofar as one of the premisses of the thesis is that the sacred already exists for the believer, that the totemic emblem is the symbol of the god. He then proceeds to describe why he thinks that god and society are symbolically the same. And this, to conclude, is, again, to take the *explicandum* as an element in the explanation.

But even if, for the sake of argument, we accept provisionally Durkheim's thesis, it still seems to present some difficulties in fitting it within his own general sociology. Specifically, how is this society of which he speaks to be identified ? As a concret social group, the family, the local community, the nation state, etc. or as the *idea* of society, i.e. : society *in abstracto* ?

It is apparent that Durkheim did not mean the first alternative. Indeed, our social life, he would say, is not exhausted in any of these groups ; all of them have a "share" in our moral existence and, therefore, all of them contribute to instill in us the sentiments of dependence, respect, and veneration so necessary for the emergence of these sentiments. Not anyone of these groups, by itself, could be accountable for the birth of these lofty sentiments. (2)

We are so left with the second alternative : our object of religious cult is society *in abstracto*, the *idea* of society. But then it is necessary to face some difficulties in the light of his own sociology : religious sentiments at bottom spring from our dependence from society and from the moral force it exerts over us. And these dependence and force come into being as the result of the action of concrete groups as it is manifested by social *sanctions*. Why ? Just because "all moral facts consist in a rule of *sanctioned* conduct." (Durkheim : 1964a, 425 ; also p. 435, *ibidem*, my emphasis). Group sanctions, then, help create this sentiment of dependence and veneration. (Ultimately we end up, he insisted continuously, loving this authority.) But the *idea* of society has no moral force : it has not of itself a capacity for sanctioning. (Uricoechea, 1979). Consequently, society as an idea, as a representation, cannot possibly be a religious object.

Thus formulated there is no exit to this contradiction in terms of his own sociological theory. And yet there is a Gordian solution available for Durkheim in the way I read him. But this, as suggested at the beginning of this paper, is a moral exit, so genuinely Durkheimian... after all.

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#### NOTES

(1) In a very fundamental way, the concept of social fact which appears in *The Rules* anticipates for many years the religious conception of society of *The Elementary Forms*. Both works share the conception that the collective experience associated with the group is nothing but intense. Our obedience to social norms and our religious sentiments are *both* grounded upon the moral authority the group, the social, gains over individual consciences. That "each individual consciousness echoes the collective sentiment [...] by virtue of the special energy resident in its collective origin" (Durkheim : 1964, 9) is a central proposition for both theoretical perspectives.

(2) It is true that in *The Rules* he identifies the source or the substratum of the social in "either the political society as a whole or some one of the partial groups it includes, such as religious denominations, political, literary, and occupational associations, etc." (Durkheim, 1964, 3). All the same, the sentiment of the social is a necessary, not a sufficient condition for the emergence of a socially qualified sentiment like the religious. In other words, the social is just the foundation of the religious without which the latter could not possibly arise but something else is required for its coming into being. Furthermore, the totemic principle or god is associated with *a determined society as a whole not with a fraction thereof*.

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